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AUTHOR Gomez, Rey A.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses teaching with a multicultural perspective in early childhood education. It is emphasized that a major goal of multicultural education is to help children become accustomed to the idea that there are many lifestyles, languages, cultures, and points of view. Other topics include negative stereotypes and the influence that early childhood educators can have on children's positive attitudes. Five myths associated with multicultural education are presented and dispelled. These are: (1) Other cultures should be presented as distinct ways of living that reflect differences from the dominant culture; (2) Bilingualism is a liability rather than an asset; (3) Multicultural education is only relevant in classes with students who are members of the groups to be studied; (4) There should be a separate, unified set of goals and curriculum for multicultural education; and (5) Mere activities, which are not placed in an explicit cultural context, constitute viable multicultural education curriculum. It is emphasized that the promotion of positive self-concepts for children is essential, as is a focus on activities that highlight the similarities and differences of all children's lives. The challenge for educators is to present an effective multicultural education foundation by means of which all children can learn to accept others. Six references are appended. (GLR)

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Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education
University of Illinois
805 West Pennsylvania Avenue
Urbana, Illinois 61801
(217) 333-1386

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Teaching with a Multicultural Perspective

Rey A. Gomez

Teaching with a multicultural perspective encourages appreciation and understanding of other cultures as well as one's own. Teaching with this perspective promotes the child's sense of the uniqueness of his own culture as a positive characteristic and enables the child to accept the uniqueness of the cultures of others.

The Development of Stereotypes

Children's attitudes toward their race and ethnic group and other cultural groups begin to form early in the preschool years. Infants can recognize differences in those around them, and young children can easily absorb negative stereotypes. Children are easily influenced by the culture, opinions, and attitudes of their caregivers. Caregivers' perceptions of ethnic and racial groups can effect the child's attitudes toward those minority groups. Early childhood educators can influence the development of positive attitudes in young children by learning about and promoting the various cultures represented among the children they teach.

Young children can develop stereotypic viewpoints of cultures different from their own when similarities among all individuals are not emphasized. Teachers can help eliminate stereotypes by presenting material and activities that enable children to learn the similarities of all individuals. Circle time is particularly helpful in this respect, as it provides children with a feeling of group identity and introduces them to the variety of cultures represented in the class (Dixon and Fraser, 1986).

A multicultural program should not focus on other cultures to the exclusion of the cultures represented in the class. Children from different cultures often have to make major behavioral adjustments to meet the expectations of the school. Teachers should take whatever measures are necessary to see that children do not interpret these adjustments as evidence of cultural stereotypes.

Dispelling the Myths

Early childhood teachers and parents of young children should become aware of the myths associated with multicultural education so that they can enhance developmentally appropriate practices.

Myth #1: Other cultures should be presented as distinct ways of living that reflect differences from the dominant culture. The emphasis on so-called exotic differences will often accentuate a *we* versus *they* polarity. Children who are not able to identify with another culture because of exotic differences will often feel superior or inferior to the culture. A multicultural program can focus on the presentation of other cultures, but at the same time allow children to be aware of the nature and uniqueness of their own culture. Children can learn about their class as an example of a common culture. Teachers can emphasize how other classes can be similar and yet different.

Myth #2: Bilingualism is a liability rather than an asset. Recent studies suggest that, all other things being equal, higher degrees of bilingualism are associated with higher levels of cognitive attainment. It is evident that the duality of languages per se does not hamper the overall language proficiency or cognitive development of bilingual children (Hakuta & Garcia, 1989).

Myth #3: Multicultural education is only relevant in classes with students who are members of the cultural or racial groups to be studied. Our world is multicultural, and children need to experience the diversity outside their immediate environment. If children are to know about minority groups, they must be taught about them in the same way they are taught about majority groups. Otherwise, children can grow to adulthood unaware of, and insensitive to, the experiences of other cultural groups.

Myth #4: There should be a separate, unified set of goals and curriculum for multicultural education. This myth conflicts with the purpose of providing relevant and meaningful education to children from all cultural backgrounds. Since we have a multitude of cultures in our world, it is impractical, perhaps impossible, to teach about all of them. Goals and curriculum will, therefore, differ considerably from class to class. It is important for early childhood teachers and parents to acknowledge that everyone has a culture, not just those who appear to be different. Children who are taught to appreciate and understand their own culture learn to understand others' cultures in the process. The appropriate curriculum for understanding America's diverse cultures is a multicultural cur-

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riculum taught within a developmental framework. It promotes recognition, understanding, and acceptance of cultural diversity and individual uniqueness. This curriculum is based in concepts such as cultural pluralism, intergroup understanding, and human relations. It is not restrictive or limited to a specific course, set of skills, or time of year. (Vold, 1985).

Myth #5: Mere activities, which are not placed in an explicit cultural context, constitute viable multicultural education curriculum. All activities should be accompanied by commentaries that explain their cultural context. Activities should always be chosen on the basis of developmental appropriateness.

Promoting a Multicultural Perspective

Multicultural education embodies a perspective rather than a curriculum. Teachers must consider children's cultural identities and be aware of their own biases. It is tempting to deny our prejudices and claim that we find all children equally appealing. Teachers and parents need to acknowledge the fact that we, like our children, are inevitably influenced by the stereotypes and one-sided view of society that exists in our schools and the media. Not only must we recognize those biases, but we must change the attitude they represent by accepting all children as we receive them.

One problem with the current thrust in multicultural education is that it pays little or no attention to teaching people how to recognize when culturally and racially different groups are being victimized by the racist or biased attitudes of the larger society. In order to change people's oppressive ways, we must learn about oppression. We must examine our responses to diversity, devoting as much effort to changing them as we devote to learning about culture. Nurturing diversity means making multicultural education a process of action, through which we as adults achieve clarity about our condition in this society and ways to change it (Phillips, 1988).

Teachers and parents can take several approaches to integrate and develop a multicultural perspective. The promotion of a positive self-concept is essential, as is a focus on activities that highlight the similarities and differences of all children's lives. Children's play, particularly role play, is an excellent strategy for developing new perspectives on culture and lifestyles. The treatment of children as unique individuals, each with something special to contribute, is an important strategy. If a teacher is to understand the whole child, he must become aware of the child's cultural background. Children can benefit from understanding the teacher's heritage and background. The feeling of connection that results is vital to the child's acceptance of the similarities and differences of others.

Through multicultural literature, children discover that all cultural groups have made significant contributions to civilization. A well-balanced multicultural literature program includes literature that depicts people with a variety of aspirations, from different sociometric levels, with different occupations, and with a range of human characteristics (Norton, 1985).

Conclusion

As our country continues to exhibit great diversity, the need for understanding and accepting the differences among all people has never been more important. Thus, the challenge for educators is to present an effective multicultural education foundation by means of which all children can learn to accept others.

The goal of multicultural education is not only to teach children about other groups or countries. It is also to help children become accustomed to the idea that there are many lifestyles, languages, cultures, and points of view. The purpose of multicultural curriculum is to attach positive feelings to multicultural experiences so that each child will feel included and valued, and will feel friendly and respectful toward people from other ethnic and cultural groups (Dimidjian, 1989). One key to helping young children develop a sense of being citizens of the world lies with the early childhood teacher. The disposition exhibited by this individual in promoting everyone's culture will be the successful factor in the child's development of a multicultural perspective.

For more information

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